THE SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF THE MACHINE IN FRANCE AS SEEN IN NINETEENTH CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE

BY

GEORGE ROBERT HILTON

B. A., University of Minnesota, 1929

M. A., University of Minnesota, 1930

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1940

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The subject of this thesis was suggested by the late Professor Régis Michaud, to whom the author is deeply indebted for his constant advice and inspiration during the early stages of the preparation of this study. It is a pleasure also to acknowledge the encouragement and helpful criticism given by Professors Arthur Hamilton and J. F. Jackson.

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During the nineteenth century French literature was brought face to face with a phenomenon the like of which it had never known before. This phenomenon was the machine age, during which Romanticism grew and declined. With the waning of the Romantic movement, attention became focused more and more on practical things, and this tendency toward realism brought with it a corresponding distrust of imaginary, idealistic, and utopian writing. In the latter half of the century Realism and Naturalism gained ground and became the dominant literary philosophy of the period. At the same time, the Parnassians were fostering the idea of art for art's sake, which indeed was the only way in which they could maintain their artistic independence during the mercenary Second Empire. There was, then, a rather complex series of literary movements clinging to an equally intricate maze of conflicting literary ideologies in the nineteenth century. These, of necessity, reacted to a new social force, *i.e.*, the machine, in a variety of ways.

In a study such as this it would be presumptuous to make any claim of completeness. The field is so vast and so much significant work is inaccessible, that it has been necessary to consider the value of available material mainly as an indication of trends. It is not the purpose of this study to determine such minutiae as the date of the first mention of the machine in French literature, nor to evaluate the significance (or insignificance) of every allusion to it thereafter. Neither is it intended to be an amateur economic history of the machine in France in the nineteenth century. The historical data given are for the sole purpose of indicating the background essential to the understanding of certain literary events and trends.

Four different aspects of the subject seem to require treatment. Accordingly the study is divided into four parts. The first shows how the machine was treated as a novelty, considered by some to be amusing, by others to be a dangerous innovation from which man should be protected. The second is a discussion of how the problem of the machine was dealt with by social theorists whose work has at least an indirect connection with

literature. The third deals with the attempt of Maxime Du Camp, under the influence of Saint-Simonism, to introduce his mystical concept of the machine into French poetry. The fourth indicates how Daudet and Zola portrayed the machine as a social force.

I

The first part of this study has been arbitrarily limited to the railroad, since it may be considered as the most conspicuous if not the most important manifestation of the machine age in the first half of the century. Although the growth of the factory system is unquestionably a more important result of the industrial revolution than is the replacement of stagecoaches by trains, it would be somewhat unfair to judge authors on the basis of their reactions to social phenomena which, to some of them, were very remote indeed. For that reason this part deals exclusively with the development of the railroad and its effect on the literature of the first half of the century. In later chapters the machine is considered also in its other forms.

Many of the early comments on the railroad were casual at best, but although they should not be considered too seriously, they shed some light on the problems which accompanied the first decades of the machine age in France. This was the period when the railroad was on trial, so to speak, not only across the fields of France, but also in its legislative halls and in its courts of justice. Before it had had time to win the confidence of the government, and of the general public, the railroad was haled into court, charged with responsibility for an accident which had resulted in the death of forty-three of its passengers and employees. It was indeed an inauspicious beginning for a modern system of rapid transportation, in which some people felt sure that the future prosperity of France was at stake.

The derailment of May 8, 1842, which was the cause of this court action, was a tragedy which might have had very far-reaching consequences. It threatened (but fortunately did not halt) the progress of the still adolescent railroad industry. It afforded French legal talent an excellent opportunity to develop arguments analysing the privileges and responsibilities of industry. It even left its mark on French poetry through the medium of the lawyers' eloquent polemics and Alfred de Vigny's

sensitive poetic style. Lesser lights than Vigny attempted to condemn or to defend the railroad in verse, but their efforts are merely of passing interest in contrast to the masterful strophes of *La Maison du Berger*. It remained for Alphonse de Lamartine to come to the defense of the railroad, but as a Deputy rather than as a poet.

II

This study would be quite incomplete without some discussion of the more serious expressions of opinion on this new social force, to supplement the early casual comments of authors who, at best, were amateur observers in regard to the nature of machine industry. Here we are concerned with writers who made the critical or theoretical study of the social order their specialty. To avoid undue length and unnecessary repetition, this discussion is limited to four men who approached the subject from different angles. These four are an economist (Sismondi), a historian (Michelet), and two utopians of whom one (Saint-Simon) was an authoritarian and the other (Fourier) a libertarian. In this way we see something of the divergent currents of thought on this important question. The four are selected not arbitrarily, but in an effort to show several ways of approach to the problem and the different reactions to it (not to say solutions, which would be an over-statement), and to present each by the discussion of a well qualified representative.

The four men can easily be grouped into pairs. Michelet and Fourier were principally French in outlook. The other two, Sismondi and Saint-Simon, were rather cosmopolitan in experience and interest. On the other hand, Michelet and Sismondi had in common the fact that they were not utopians. All four agreed that there was something essentially wrong with the economic system, but only Saint-Simon claimed to see in the triumph of the machine the ultimate solution to the problem.

Sismondi has been shown to have been about a century in advance of his time, perhaps more. Without indulging in any fascinating but visionary utopian schemes, he did formulate certain suggestions for economic improvement which, consciously or unconsciously, have been followed by proponents of social legislation. These include provision for the right of labor to organize and to bargain collectively, minimum wage and maxi-

mum hour laws, and anti-child-labor legislation. To have had one's advice followed, even without thanks, within a hundred years is a distinction that can be claimed by neither of the two utopians who were so sure that their vast plans for the salvation of mankind would soon be realized.

Although Saint-Simon and Fourier were in complete agreement in their opposition to *laissez-faire* competitive economy, they were at opposite extremes in their respective conceptions of a perfected economic and social system. Saint-Simon envisaged a highly industrialized society in which there would be no wars, no unemployment, no human or material waste, but complete synchronization of the varied talents of which man is possessed. He believed that, by means of the machine, industry could not fail to bring this about. This proposed system, which was socially progressive but politically anti-democratic, was based on the idea of unquestioning obedience to the will of the fittest. Because of the strict discipline which the Saint-Simonists imposed upon themselves, the movement developed towards authoritarianism, and it did not have any notable popular appeal.

Unlike Saint-Simon, Fourier predicted the establishment of a society in which people would not limit their activities to specialized fields, but rather they would divide their daily programs into brief periods of varied kinds of work. This would give every one adequate opportunity for self-expression and would avoid the monotony of constant attention to the same type of work. He advised reducing the tending of machines to the minimum, and suggested that each person should devote as much time as possible to agriculture inasmuch as tilling the soil brings one closest to nature. He insisted particularly on the necessity of making work attractive, in order that people's esthetic needs might be satisfied without interruption while they were engaged in useful labor as well as during periods of relaxation. This was to be brought about by the establishment of elaborate co-operative communities called "phalansteries", which would consist of living quarters, work-shops, gardens, community kitchens, playgrounds, etc., equipped for all forms of labor and recreation. Fourier waited in vain for a millionaire to have the foresight to finance a phalanstery, ever confident that once the first one had been organized, others would follow in rapid succession.

In regard to Saint-Simon and Fourier, again the question suggests itself as to whether they were in advance of their time. It can be answered in two ways. They were decidedly so in their penetrating analyses of the social order, the anarchy of which they found unbearable. A century later their criticisms of society are still valid. Critically, then, they were at least a hundred years in advance of their time. Constructively?—who can say how far they antedated the establishment of their respective systems? They were naïve in their assumption that their plans would materialize within a brief space of time, but their naïveté by no means dates them. It can be a characteristic of any age. Their patterns of thought, although slightly concealed by different names, are still to be found in the twentieth century. Certain aspects of Fourierism have been perpetuated in the Co-operative movement, while the main ideas and characteristics of Saint-Simonism are to be found in the Oxford movement and in Technocracy.

III

The third part of this study is concerned exclusively with the one figure who was conspicuous in his efforts to make French poetry machine-conscious. That man was Maxime Du Camp, a friend of Flaubert, and a somewhat belated Saint-Simonist. He succeeded in making quite a stir with the outspoken preface to what he hoped would be his epoch-making *Chants modernes*. The preface, in reality more famous than the *Chants* which accompanied it, did not, however, become the manifesto of a new school. The reason for this failure is the question with which we are concerned.

Considered as a manifesto, the preface does not seem to be written in unduly exaggerated terms. Du Camp wanted to be heard, and therefore wrote eloquently and emphatically. His preface, thirty-nine pages in length, contains two rather lengthy digressions, one a severe arraignment of the French Academy which he termed "un corps essentiellement anti-littéraire", and the other an indictment of the Catholic Church for its efforts throughout the ages to control intellectual activity. The remaining portion of the preface can be divided into two parts, the one concerned with the demolition of certain traditional concepts, and the other submitting various constructive substitutes.

In the first he deplored the poverty of literary production of the time and the servility of both authors and critics. He demanded that the slavish imitation of the ancients cease, and if an author must imitate them, that he do so by writing of his own epoch as they wrote of theirs. He declared that people should be glad to forget the past, and that they should feel pride in the present. He closed with the threat that if authors did not realize this they would have very slight chance of being long remembered by posterity.

The remaining portion of the preface is somewhat vague. The poet was not as adept at giving constructive advice as he was at censuring what others were producing. He suggested that writers should consider themselves as collaborators of scientific men, and set themselves the task of translating the technical language of science into literary style which would be universally understood and appreciated. He also exhorted poets to compose verse which would deal with scientific and mechanical subjects, which, he contended, were quite as worthy of poetic treatment as many of the mythological subjects of centuries gone by.

The program advanced by this preface was, in many respects, not bad. It was sincerely thought out, even though it was worded rather harshly here and there. One must, however, also examine the poems in which Du Camp sought to demonstrate his theories.

Only five poems, grouped under the subtitle of *Les Chants de la matière,* show a conscious effort to demonstrate these theories. The five are entitled *La Vapeur, La Faulx, La Bobine, La Locomotive,* and *Le Sac d'argent.* A glance at their titles shows that they deal with subjects unusual to poetry. The question that remains is whether or not they were successful poetically.

Several things must be considered in an attempt to evaluate Du Camp's contribution to literature. His early poetry is sufficiently good to indicate that he was not without talent. He seems to have had a fairly keen sense for verse and metre, and the ability to make use of images to develop thoughts and to portray emotions. His interest in steam, electricity, machines, factories, railroads, and the like, appears to have been quite sincere (in spite of Flaubert's estimate of him as an opportunist),

but it was of very recent date, and therefore not based on very profound knowledge of these things. He had not been a worker in industry. His acquaintance with it, then, was that of a spectator. One might wonder just how acute he was as an observer of scenes that had not been long familiar to him. There is no evidence in his work that he was able to see that industry had also an unesthetic side. This makes it appear that his enthusiasm blinded him to unpleasant realities.

In his effort to make the machine acceptable to French poetics, the results obtained were decidedly uneven. He was not unsuccessful in *La Faulx,* but decidedly unrealistic in *La Locomotive, La Bobine,* and in portions of *La Vapeur.* It seems that he was more capable of creating an artistic description when he was not bound by the exigencies of poetic composition, and obviously he produced better poetry on the occasions when he was not preoccupied by the desire to prove a point.

Du Camp gave the French literary world a kind of jolt by hurting its feelings with his quite undiplomatic preface. He had declared in that preface that some attention to modern subjects, notably the machine and industry, would tend to revitalize literature. In his poetry he showed that this could be done, but he was not able to do it well enough to prove that it would have the revitalizing effect on literature which he had predicted. His extremely frank preface failed to become the manfesto of a new school, because its tone antagonized his contemporaries and predisposed them to be exceedingly critical both of his poetry and of his ideas. This was unfortunate, since the ideas of the preface were by no means of negligible value, and were entitled to receive a fair hearing. The obvious poetic defects in the *Chants de la matière* gave hostile critics an excuse to condemn Du Camp's theories as unworkable, and to point to his own poetry as conclusive evidence.

It is perhaps idle to speculate on what might have happened if Du Camp had been either a better poet or a better diplomat. It seems unfortunate, however, that Du Camp's own tactlessness of expression should have been largely responsible for the lack of favor with which his poetry was received, and that the defects of his poetry were partly responsible in turn for the intensely critical attitude toward his ideas. If Du Camp had limited his

literary theorizing to the prefatory poem *Aux poëtes,* which was his *Art poétique,* and had abstained from trying to demonstrate his poetic theories, he might have wielded a significant influence on the development of French poetry.

IV

After having seen the first reactions to the machine, both casual and serious, of French writers, and a mid-century attempt to use it in order to revive French poetry, it is interesting to observe how the machine was treated in several novels which have some bearing on that subject. The five novels with which we are concerned are *Jack,* by Alphonse Daudet, and *Germinal, La Bête humaine, Paris,* and *Travail,* by Zola.

Daudet's story of the many misfortunes of Jack's short life has been widely read. It is known, since he stated it definitely, that the model for this story actually lived, and went through experiences comparable to those of Jack in the novel. Although the documentary method used by Daudet is realistic, the plot is far from being so. It is much more like the series of misfortunes and calamities that were characteristic of Romanticism. It is a novel of the *David Copperfield* variety (except that the hero dies before attaining normal adult life), in which the good characters are very good, and the unpleasant ones very disagreeable indeed.

Disregarding the masterful descriptions of machinery which contribute in no small measure to the artistic completeness of the novel, the remaining problem is that of the social attitudes toward factories which are expressed or implied. It will be recalled that Jack undertakes his apprenticeship at Indret at the behest of his unsympathetic stepfather, who wants to get the boy away from his kindly but easy-going and none too intelligent mother. Jack is shown in an environment where he is definitely out of place but of which he is becoming unmistakably a part. The abyss separating him from the class of society to which his mother belongs becomes deeper and deeper. He finally decides to get away from Indret at any cost, and does so by shipping as a stoker.

When, after being shipwrecked, he gets back to Paris, and at last is on the way to making a place for himself in life, his mother, weak, fickle creature that she is, still regards him as

her inferior, and treats him with the most extreme indifference.

The machine, as a part of the factory system, is shown, then, by Daudet, as a wedge whose function is to separate individual from individual and class from class. To him it was something very powerful and awe-inspiring, which made human beings into beasts or robots. He evidently could see no chance that the machine might be instrumental in bringing about the emancipation of working people. To him it appeared to be solely an enslaving force which dulled people's sensibilities and made them similar to the machines they tended.

The other novelist with whose work we are concerned had a much broader view of the problem than did Alphonse Daudet. His attitude toward it, moreover, was not static, but shows a logical development from one novel to another.

In *Germinal* the machine, properly speaking, is scarcely evident, since the mining industry at that time was practically unmechanized, and even today depends to a great extent on manual labor. However, the social forces which conflict in *Germinal* are the same as in more highly mechanized industries. It was the careful analysis of these social forces that appealed to Zola even more than the artistic potentialities of the description of machine industry. The economic domination of the company over its employees, the monotony and fatigue of the workers' lives, the futility of their efforts to gain the attention of the absentee company management, the necessity for the workers to co-operate, and the inevitability of more or less violent conflict, were problems of tremendous interest to Zola, and of necessity they had a place in his *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille française sous le Second Empire.*

In *La Bête humaine,* Zola set himself the difficult task of developing a novel that had for its setting the very complex environment of the railroad industry, and of showing in it, the almost human qualities of a locomotive and the influence that it wielded on the main character. The result is a realistic psychological novel.

Again disregarding the literary excellence of the descriptions, which in themselves would merit a detailed stylistic study, the chief accomplishment of the author is his vivid portrayal of the way in which the locomotive and the neurotic main character

complement each other. Jacques Lantier, a brother of Etienne in *Germinal,* had a strange neurosis which took the form of an impulsive desire to kill any woman to whom he was attracted. This abnormality, which he tried in vain to conquer, gave him the nature described by the title of the book.

Lonesome, restless, even passionate, but frustrated because of his fear of association with the opposite sex, he was aware of his murder-impulse, and tried to avoid letting it be aroused, having no confidence in the possibility of controlling it. The only activity that afforded him any true satisfaction was piloting the locomotive, *la Lison,* and in taking care of it. In motion it satisfied his desire for power and domination. At rest it received what affection he was able to bestow.

There could hardly be a more complete personalization of a machine. *La Lison* was the one personality that could humanize Jacques. The sturdy, powerful, yet sensitive and docile locomotive, whose qualities Zola skillfully described by combining physiological and mechanical terms, was apparently the necessary complement to Jacques Lantier's peculiar characteristics.

Just as he had portrayed the humanizing influence of the machine on one character in *La Bête humaine,* Zola indicated its civilizing and even revolutionizing potentialities in *Paris.* This novel deals primarily with the regeneration of the Abbé Pierre Froment, his abandonment of asceticism and assumption of the responsibilities of matrimony and parenthood. His rehabilitation is brought about by the example of his brother Guillaume's serene skepticism and his life-long struggle to invent a machine. This invention is finally perfected by Guillaume and his son Thomas at about the same time that Pierre's spiritual regeneration is completed by the birth of his son Jean.

There is nothing in *Paris* comparable to the vivid descriptions or to the personalization of the machine in *La Bête humaine.* There is, however, no need for either. It is not so much the finished invention that matters here; it is rather the struggle to create it, and thereby to wrest from nature additional power, and particularly the redeeming effect of that struggle on individuals and on humanity.

In *Travail* the same theme is carried still further. Luc Froment, inspired by some of the writings of Fourier, attempts to

transform a factory and its surroundings into a co-operative community organized along Fourierist lines. Being quite successful, he has to face the antagonism of rival factories still operated on the wage system. Even workers in these competing establishments, and petty bourgeois merchants, are arrayed against him, being led to believe that he is intent on destroying commerce, private property, and even the idea of government. This antagonism, when thwarted by the law, becomes still more acute, and develops into mob violence. In spite of these obstacles, the co-operative factory continues to prosper, specializing in peace-time industries, while the rival plant makes profits on the implements of war.

The machine is shown to be capable, when properly controlled, of doing for humanity what the locomotive had done temporarily for Jacques Lantier, and what the example of Guillaume Froment's trust in science and nature had done for his brother Pierre. Although he had no illusions as to the obstacles to be overcome, Zola had a distinctly hopeful attitude in regard to the rôle of the machine in civilization. In this his views are far different from those of Alphonse Daudet.

* * *

A study in which a certain theme is followed through the various periods and *genres* of a century of literature obviously does not lend itself to a succinct conclusion. The social importance of the machine in any literature during any period, is of necessity a relative matter, and one which is difficult or impossible to measure with any accuracy. It is evident, however, that French literature, while somewhat aloof from such subjects as the machine during the first half of the century, gradually abandoned that aloofness to a limited extent, and demonstrated that the machine has esthetic and psychological implications as well as industrial and commercial value.

The early years of the twentieth century will no doubt offer an even more fertile field for a study of this kind, and should yield a greater variety and a greater abundance of significant material.

VITA

George Robert Hilton was born June 16, 1909, at Duluth, Minnesota, and attended the public schools of that city, Hibbing (Minnesota) Junior College, and the University of Minnesota, receiving the B.A. in June, 1929. Having been granted a Fellowship in Romance Languages, he entered the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota the following September, and received the M.A. in December, 1930.

On being appointed to an Assistantship in Romance Languages at the University of Illinois in February, 1931, he transferred to the Graduate School of that university, where he took courses toward the doctorate in Romance Languages and German under Professors Aron, Hamilton, Michaud, Oliver, Van Horne, and Will.

The summers of 1932 and 1937 were spent in travel on the continent of Europe and in Mexico respectively.

In 1939 he resigned his Assistantship at the University of Illinois to accept the position of Instructor in Modern Languages at the University of Akron for the year 1939-1940. He has accepted an Instructorship in Romance Languages at the College of the City of New York for the year 1940-1941.